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ABSTRACT

On-line support groups provide an alternative to traditional support groups by linking grieving people who seek support, especially if support is not available in their local community. Furthermore, these groups can reduce the sense of isolation caused by geographical or physical/medical constraints and increase feelings of validations. Although preliminary research suggests positive effects, on-line support groups are not appropriate for everyone and should not be considered a panacea. This chapter examines the grief and healing process. It discusses the on-line support groups available to ease the grieving and healing process. Then one such support group is examined. Discussions of the ability to provide immediate responses to traumatic events as well as other benefits and limitations of on-line support groups conclude this chapter. (Contains 19 references.) (MKA)

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Coping With Loss and Grief Through On-Line Support Groups

Juneau Mahan Gary and Linda Remolino

The death of a loved one is a natural and inevitable life experience. Those who must cope with the loss of a loved one experience a wide variety of grief reactions that are normal and expected, yet difficult and painful to experience. The grief reactions encompass psychological, physical, and social aspects of a person's life (Rando, 1988).

Typically, people discuss their grief reactions and their passage through the phases of grief (although they generally do not label the reactions or phases as such) with someone they know or do not discuss their grief reactions at all. Discussing reactions with good listeners who have "been there" enables people to resolve issues and complete the grief process, thus paving the way for healing, rather than suffering in silence and suppressing feelings. Empathic listeners with words of encouragement and an accepting approach can improve the griever's clarity of thought and encourage creative problem-solving abilities that promote healing (Fleming, 1990).

What happens to the griever, though, after the empathic listeners have helped as much as they can or have implicitly communicated that the grieving period should be over and that life must go on? The griever can join a traditional, face-to-face support group or join an on-line support group. Current computer technology now enables people to discuss issues of grief and loss with others as well as exchange information, resources, and services from the comfort of

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their homes through on-line support groups. On-line support groups can provide a level of safety, control, comfort, and anonymity for members to share their stories, pain, and healing with others in a public forum that is also private because members converse with each other from their homes or from other safe places such as a library computer terminal. In the United States, support groups, either traditional or on-line, are one of the few places where grief can be expressed openly and publicly (Golden, 1999).

This chapter first looks at the grief and healing process and at the on-line support groups available to ease the process. The chapter then examines one such support group. Discussions of the ability to provide immediate responses to traumatic events as well as other benefits and limitations of on-line support groups conclude the chapter.

GRIEF AND HEALING

The grief process is typically a nonlinear, repetitive, and painful process to transcend. It involves adaption to many changes over time, is marked by repetitive cycles of progression followed by stagnation or regression, yet is necessary to complete in order for the griever to heal. The ultimate goal in completing the grief process is to confront grief reactions and to adapt to change. Many authors have proposed various phases of grief that the griever must transcend, but in general, there are three broad phases of grief: avoidance, confrontation, and reestablishment (Rando, 1988).

Grieving is generally perceived as an emotional process that involves feelings, thoughts, and attitudes. In addition to the emotional aspect of grief, there are also the physical and behavioral aspects, culminating in the three aspects of grief (Rando, 1988):

- **Psychological/emotional reactions** include fear, anxiety, loss of faith, disbelief, depression, guilt, confusion, search for meaning, despair, relief, hallucinations, dreams/nightmares, lack of concentration, and anger.
- **Physical/health symptoms** include changes in eating and/or sleep patterns, weight increase or decrease, crying, fatigue, increased risk for illness, muscle weakness, and oversensitivity to noise.

- **Behavioral responses** include diminished interest in usual activities, acting out, and withdrawal from and/or rejection of support systems.

The griever is often assisted through the grief and healing process by his or her support system, but ultimately the griever must complete the journey alone. Others can and do help, but they may be unaware of the type and extent of emotional support needed, may be limited by myths about grief and death, may be afraid to express their own feelings, may be uncomfortable listening to the expression of feelings by others, or may experience familial or cultural taboos about open discussions about grief or death. The griever may need to turn to support groups for acceptance and understanding.

Traditional support groups are effective in assisting many people to express feelings and improve coping strategies, but they also have obstacles that limit their efficacy. They usually require that services be available in the member's geographic area, that everyone convene at the same time, that issues of cultural stigmatization and social status about seeking support external to the family be resolved so as not to interrupt attendance, that membership fees be paid (which may be prohibitive for some), that obstacles (such as being housebound due to physical, medical, or caregiver limitations) be overcome, or that transportation arrangements be made (Weinberg, Uken, Schmale, & Adamek, 1995). Although face-to-face support groups help many, they are not a panacea.

ON-LINE SUPPORT

Many on-line support groups are perceived by their members as being helpful, validating, and supportive (Spinney, 1995; Weinberg, Schmale, Uken, & Wessel, 1995; Weinberg, Uken, et al., 1995; Zinn, Simon, & Orme, 1997), although current research on the efficacy of on-line support groups is limited. An on-line support group for loss helps to reduce members' feelings of isolation and their sense of feeling overwhelmed, which are common reactions during the grieving process. Participation also gives members the opportunity to review their lives, complete unfinished business, "let go," reconcile relationships with others, work through the phases of

grief, and move on as they reenter daily life (Rando, 1988). Weinberg, Uken, et al. (1995) noted the importance of having members who are in different phases of coping ability in order to maximize group support. Members in an early phase of grief can share their anxieties while members in a later phase can offer support and problem solving. In addition to the favorable reactions of members to on-line support groups, Weinberg, Uken, et al. (1995) identified three of Yalom's (1995) therapeutic factors (i.e., instillation of hope, group cohesion, and universality) as contributing to an on-line support group's perceived helpfulness.

On-line support groups are a relatively new and growing component of the larger field of cyberservices for mental health. On-line support groups can be accessed through use of a computer and modem in conjunction with comprehensive Internet service providers (ISPs), such as Prodigy, America-On-Line (AOL), and CompuServe, through Internet portals (e.g., Yahoo) or through specific web sites (e.g., www.death-dying.com). Table 8-1 provides a sample of web sites for loss and grief issues. Kotecki and Chamness (1999) have offered a tool to evaluate the quality of web sites. Each comprehensive ISP, portal, or web site sets its own standards regarding training of hosts, crisis management, regulations, disclaimers, quality control, and procedures.

On-line support groups are based on the tenets of traditional support groups. Both types of support groups encourage members to express concerns, emotions, and ideas; offer advice and support; ask questions; and share information in an anonymous setting. On-line support groups offer many features of traditional support groups (Weinberg, Uken, et al., 1995), but do so using cybercommunities or chat rooms in which people participate in self-help and support groups. Like traditional support groups, on-line support groups can range from serving as one therapeutic component of a comprehensive mental health system to serving as the sole support system.

In particular, on-line support groups for loss assist members in facing the void left by the loss of a loved one. Support is offered as members adjust to significant changes and major stressors in their lives. Facing holidays and special occasions are considered difficult for most members, especially if this will be their first occasion or holiday since the loss of a loved one (Weinberg, Schmale, Uken, &

Table 8-1
Sample of Web Sites for Loss and Grief

www.azsids.org	www.kn.pacbell.com
www.crisissupport.org	www.ourhouse-grief.org
www.death-dying.com	www.petloss.com
www.evergreenhealthnet.org	www.rc.net
www.familiesandsurvivors.com	www.rivendell.org
www.grief.org.au	www.seattlewidowed.com
www.griefsupport.org	www.shiningsouls.com
www.growthhouse.org	www.survivingsorrow.org
www.hospicenwo.org	www.taps.org
www.infomrt.com	www.webhealing.com
www.inforamp.net	www.worldmemorial.com

Wessel, 1996). Likewise, those who are terminally ill and/or their loved ones face similar anxieties if they anticipate that approaching holidays and special occasions may be the last ones they celebrate together.

A GLIMPSE INSIDE ONE ON-LINE SUPPORT GROUP FOR LOSS

This section contains a description of the experiences of one of this chapter's authors who hosts an on-line support group for loss issues. Most members focus on grief issues, including death from a terminal illness or coping with the death of a loved one. Members correspond anonymously using contrived screen names (i.e., pseudonyms) and receive immediate feedback, support, advice, and/or information. They take turns communicating with each other in a manner similar to a face-to-face support group. In spite of the lack of physical interaction and the lack of nonverbal communication among members in on-line support groups, limited expressions of emotions are conveyed symbolically, visually, and in shorthand as illustrated in Table 8-2. Members can communicate with the whole room or converse with an individual as others follow the dialogue on their computer screens.

This on-line support group for loss is in real time, is text based, and meets for 1 hour per week at a specific time. The scheduled

Table 8-2
Cybershorthand and Symbolic Expression of Emotions

Emotions	**Symbols**
Frown	:(and ☹
Hug to others	{{{{{}}}}}
Hug to the entire room	{{{{{room}}}}}
Hug and kiss	{}&**
Smile	:) and ☺
Shorthand	**Symbols**
Cursing	&!$#*%
Laughing out loud	LOL
Long time, no see	LTNS
Yelling	Capitalize word (e.g., he HATES that)

meeting time encourages consistent participation. Most members attend regularly while a few attend intermittently. Well-established and stable on-line support groups can create a sense of community as well as create lasting and intimate relationships with others whom they will never meet face-to-face, yet from whom they can seek support in times of despair and isolation. The bonds of this cybercommunity can become so intense in on-line support groups for loss that in extenuating circumstances a private session can be arranged. In one example, two members, both in the final stages of terminal illnesses, requested that the host facilitate their final and private good-byes.

Hosts, sometimes called community leaders, are resource persons, rather than on-line counselors or mental health experts. Counseling, as in e-counseling, is not permitted because a human services degree is not a requirement to host. Hosts use human relations skills to assist members to express feelings, and they disseminate information. Training for hosts is described at the end of this section. As a resource person, the host makes referrals to helplines, hospice services, books, cassettes/CDs, crisis centers, other on-line support groups, traditional support/self-help groups, and/or mental health web sites. Most hosts are not paid, but some are compensated with free ISP services.

Prior to each session, the host selects a specific topic designed to promote intimate dialogues and self-disclosure. The quality of each session is different and is based on the composition of the group, each member's grief reactions, relevance of the topic, and members' pressing issues. At times, members' needs may differ from the preselected topic, and the host must be flexible in order to meet the group's immediate needs. Topics discussed in typical sessions include phases of grief, death of a child, predominant emotions during each phase of grief, helping caregivers to assist aging and/or ailing parents or other relatives, physical changes during grieving, issues of terminal illness, helping others through the grieving process, and helping grieving children. The excerpt included here represents a typical session from the on-line support group for loss hosted by one of the authors of this chapter. In this session, members are discussing coping with an approaching holiday season. It illustrates the types of experiences shared by members and demonstrates the individual and group support and expressions of emotion within an anonymous environment. Sessions are fast paced and sometimes contain grammatical and spelling errors. The session has been edited for ease of comprehension. What follows is what members see on their individual computer screens:

Host: *Welcome to our chat! Join us as we discuss the losses in our lives.*

Question: Would you like me to go over some tips for getting through the holiday season?

Member 1: Yes, please.

Member 2: Yes, host, please do.

Member 3: Yes.

Member 4: Yes, I seem to have lost my coping skills.

Host: *Understand your grief; you have to be ready for the holidays . . . Accept that they will be hard and you will feel your loss . . .*

Member 1: The support that I used to have . . . it's gone . . . comfort is gone . . . I've isolated myself for years.

Member 3: Member 1, you have us . . . we're support for you.

Member 5: {{{{{{{{{Member 1}}}}}}}}}

Member 6: I found that just getting out at Christmas and giving of yourself and getting involved comforts me. . . .

Host: *Consider this . . . Are all the traditions you celebrate during the holidays really traditions or just things that you've done in a certain way that really hold no significance for you? This may be a good time to give that some thought. . . . Can you change anything? Maybe it would help.*

Member 2: Well, I don't do anything traditional so that I am not taken back to ugly times.

Member 6: Nothing specifically traditional, just flow with it. . . .

Member 7: I can't change...family doesn't know my grief.

Host: *Prepare yourself for the holidays by taking an extra effort to take care of you! Pamper yourself; do some "selfish things" . . . . be gentle with you!*

Member 1: That's good.

Member 5: Sometimes I find that I have to just put my feelings aside and just go on.

Member 3: For now . . . I've been renting a lot of movies that hold my attention and eating only my favorite foods and I try to find things that make me laugh . . . I've been doing a lot of laughing. . . . I find this really healing.

Host: *Laughter is great medicine* :)

Member 6: I can't laugh, I can't cry either, I feel numb.

Host: *Numbness is a very normal part of the grieving process. . . . {{{{{{Member 6}}}}}}*

Member 2: {{{{{{Member6}}}}}}

Member 3: I can relate, Member 6.

Host: *A neat idea . . . How about celebrating the life of the one who you've lost? . . . Create a treasure box?*

Member 7: How host?

Member 6: You've got my interest.

Member 1: Can you explain host?

Host: *A treasure box is a box that you get from the grocery store. Decorate it with wrapping paper. Have each member of the family write down two or three of their*

best memories of the loved one. Put the remembrances in an envelope and put it into the box. Place a keepsake that you have of that person in the box too. Don't share anything yet! Designate a certain time of the day of your holiday to all gather around the box. Withdraw them one by one and share with the group. Save the funniest ones for the last and this will be a heart-rending experience. You can be assured of ending it with some laughter.

Member 2: Hey, I like that.

Member 3: Just the thought of it is making me cry :(

Member 6: I want to be strong again :((

Host: *{{{{{{{Member 3}}}}}}}*

Member 5: {{{{{Member 3 & Member 6}}}}} you will be again. . . .

Host: *Remember tears are liquid emotion . . . they are healing . . . it's okay to cry . . . you are watering the flowers in your soul.*

Member 8: Host, I would then water the flowers of more than my soul, I could sustain a rainforest LOL.

Member 7: Me too.

Member 9: I don't know how to get there . . . I can't cry . . . I want to . . . maybe something is wrong with me. . . .

Host: *Please always remember that there is no time limit on grief . . . everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time frame.*

Host: *{{{{{{{{{{Room}}}}}}}}}}*

Member 10: Do you have to do the treasure box just during the holidays or can you do it . . . Like at birthdays or anniversaries . . .?

Host: *It can be done anytime that you wish . . .*

Member 2: I don't think I can do it. . . . I'm not there yet.

Member 3: Maybe someday I can. . . .

Hosts are selected without regard for professional credentials because they are not offering counseling services. Although some hosts are human services specialists, others are not. Prospective hosts are screened on-line to determine their interpersonal skills and their ability to facilitate group discussion. Once selected, hosts

are trained on-line. AOL's training of hosts, for example, consists of the Virtual Leaders Academy and Community Leaders College. Training stresses group facilitation skills, computer literacy, and enforcement of an AOL Terms of Service agreement. Training modules focus, for example, on the role of the host, crisis management, chat room behavior, and referral skills. Training is completed on-line and follows a prescribed and sequential list of courses. Each course is scheduled for 2 to 3 hours and concludes with an examination. Experienced hosts mentor newly trained hosts before they host alone. Continuing education on-line is required every 6 months and is monitored by a volunteer training coordinator.

Hosts ensure that communication remains focused on the topic and that ground rules—such as (1) remain anonymous, (2) take turns, (3) remain focused on the topic, (4) abstain from harassment (e.g., personal criticism, cursing, or name calling), and (5) maintain confidentiality—are observed. Violators of the ground rules can be sanctioned. Although violators are rare in on-line support groups for loss, violators are a common nuisance in other types of on-line support groups (e.g., Adult Children of Alcoholics—ACOA—or open chats for general mental health issues). Violator sanctions vary by ISP. Each ISP's Terms of Service contract outlines appropriate on-line behavior and explains how violations are handled.

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE TO GRIEF ON-LINE

Traumatic events that were once considered local dramas acquire national and international significance as a result of instant and extensive news coverage. Extensive media coverage of events such as the numerous school shootings and their resulting deaths between 1997 and 1999 illustrates this point. These traumatic events produced a range of emotional reactions in victims and television viewers, including anger, anxiety, depression, and fear. Noteworthy is the role that the Internet is playing in helping people to cope immediately with tragedies involving death such as the recent school shootings. For instance, many ISPs immediately responded by establishing on-line support groups devoted specifically to a school shooting. People went on-line to try to understand the numerous school shootings, to reach out to others, to learn how to make

schools safe, to cope with school violence, to handle grief reactions, and to recognize danger signs of violence in high-risk youth.

AOL, for instance, responded to the Columbine High School shootings by offering an immediate service that included dialogues with grief specialists to help people cope following the shootings. Specifically, in the afternoon and evening of the shootings, AOL News sponsored two 90-minute Live News Chats. An AOL News moderator queried participants and posed their questions in text-based format through the Internet to grief specialists in other states, including one of the authors. Participants were able to read the responses of the grief specialists and pose additional questions. At this early stage of the unfolding tragedy, questions tended to be informational (i.e., seeking answers), and comments tended to be emotional and typically expressed anger and denial (i.e., "it shouldn't happen in a place like this"). Because the tragedy was occurring during the Live News Chats, AOL News provided visual news bulletins simultaneously.

Once the shock wore off and the grieving began, on-line support groups were overwhelmed in the days and weeks following many of the school shootings. New members, either from the local area of the shootings or from among television viewers, joined veteran on-line support group members to seek support and to express anger, outrage, and other emotions. Dialogues were strained, and many members seemed to experience inhibition when disclosing intimate feelings. The sessions required strong facilitation skills by the host to encourage participation. Perhaps the strain was partially due to numbness caused by the current trauma, new members' lack of familiarity with the mechanics of on-line support groups, awkwardness about the on-line support group interactive process, or feeling overwhelmed by the wide range of emotions expressed on-line. For veteran on-line support group members who were already coping with a loss, the school tragedies or other traumatic news events can resurrect previous and unresolved loss issues and unrelated grief issues.

BENEFITS OF ON-LINE SUPPORT GROUPS FOR LOSS

The benefits of on-line support groups as they address the issues of loss and grief include increased access, the ability to meet specialized needs, and universality.

Cyberconnections/Increased Access to Support

On-line support groups for loss bring support and camaraderie to people for many reasons and in different ways. Although everyone will face a loss or will grieve the death of a loved one, such intimate and honest dialogues and expressions of grief can be stigmatizing. Relatives and neighbors may be overwhelmed and avoid the subject, pushing the frustrated and grieving person into isolation. Loss support groups validate each member's feelings and facilitate an open and intimate discussion. Furthermore, they are an alternative to traditional support groups and enable people to seek support from a variety of perspectives when feeling vulnerable, when in need of a great deal of support, or when relatives, friends, and the local community are unable to offer support.

On-line support groups reduce the sense of isolation and loneliness, a predominant reaction for most people in the midst of the grief process. Moreover, they offer support for those who reside in underserved locations, for those who are housebound, for those seeking anonymity, or for those who might otherwise grieve alone and not seek a face-to-face support group or support person (Finn, 1996; Spinney, 1995; Weinberg et al., 1996).

Specialized On-Line Support Groups

Some loss groups may need to be age- and/or gender-specific or focus on specific needs or characteristics of loss (Koocher, 1996). Specialized on-line support groups can be formed more successfully than traditional support groups that are limited by geographic boundaries. Possible topics could include death of a child, needs of survivors of homicide or suicide, death or incapacitation from a school shooting, and spiritual or cultural issues of death. Hosts, with a professional expertise in a specific issue of loss, could facilitate these on-line support groups to discuss specialized issues and concerns.

Teens and children may need age-specific groups in order to discuss loss issues based on their maturational level (Bacon, 1996; Koocher, 1996). They may be encountering their first experience with death without a frame of reference or with limited coping skills. Moreover, they may be uncomfortable seeking help from adults or may be unable to relate to adult issues about loss in adult

on-line support groups. Similarly, adults may encounter difficulty helping teens and children cope with grief. In the school shootings, for instance, teens and adolescents were directly confronted with death and mortality. Teens in other schools not directly impacted by a school shooting have gone on-line to express fear about the implications of the school shootings and concern about the possibility of violence occurring in their own schools.

A youth can access on-line support groups as long as a parental security block has not been imposed. The parents, however, should be aware of their child's Internet use and should be encouraged to capitalize on the youth's participation in on-line support groups to strengthen communication within the family.

In response to the needs of teens, On-Line Psych (through AOL), for example, has trained teens as peer hosts. However, they tend to focus on developmental issues that teens face, such as individuation and separation, rather than on loss issues in particular. Very mature teens might co-host teen on-line support groups for loss, offering teen members an alternative to talking to parents, teachers, or counselors. Most importantly, teens need someone with whom they can communicate honestly and openly about their fears, concerns, and mortality.

Universality as a Curative Factor

Others struggle, too, and this is not always evident to grieving people who tend to isolate themselves. Universality unites people as they share similar thoughts, feelings, fears, and/or reactions (Yalom, 1995) with their cybercommunity. As people share and support others, they realize that grief is normal, they feel validated, and they heal as they complete the grief process.

LIMITATIONS OF ON-LINE SUPPORT GROUPS FOR LOSS

Limitations include anonymity breaches, differing stages and phases, difficulties in crisis management, hoax perpetration, limited feedback, and unanswered ethical and legal concerns.

Anonymity Breaches

Members must consider the risks of a breach in anonymity before joining an on-line support group and are advised to limit the

disclosure of personal and identifying information during the registration process. In spite of computer security procedures, anonymity and confidentiality can be breached and dialogues may be intercepted (Lee, 1998; Newman, 1997).

The host should take steps to ensure the anonymity of each on-line support group member as well as the confidentiality of group dialogue by discouraging the exchange of identifying information. Grieving members who are often lonely and feel isolated or desperate may attempt to continue conversations with specific members at the conclusion of an on-line support group session. Personal communication between members without a host facilitating is discouraged as it can culminate in the exchange of identifying information, thus placing a vulnerable member at risk for cyberstalking as well as at risk for his or her physical safety and privacy. Additionally, the host fosters anonymity by sending referral and other requested information to a member's e-mail address rather than to a residence.

For most on-line support group members, anonymity is preferred. It enables them to discuss personal issues and ideas that they would not talk about with someone who knew them. For men in particular, anonymity provides a vehicle to discuss their personal feelings because they may not consider it "the thing to do" or the male way to handle problems (Spinney, 1995). For reticent adolescents, Zimmerman (1987) found that on-line communication among adolescent group members tended to be more expressive and more intimate in comparison to face-to-face adolescent group communications.

Differing Stages of Group Development and Phases of Grief

On-line support groups for loss are open continuously to new membership. Fluctuations in membership, which occur in face-to-face support groups as well, make it difficult for on-line support groups to maintain the working stage of group development for extended periods (Corey & Corey, 1997). Group cohesion is also diluted by each member's individual grief reactions, resulting in a diverse membership that needs support throughout the grief process. These limitations reduce the efficacy of on-line support

groups as a sole support source for some members. On-line support groups can be an additional support within a comprehensive human services support system for those members who are vulnerable or need additional assistance.

Difficulties in Crisis Management

The successful resolution of an emotional crisis in cyberspace is a challenge. Issues of limited feedback and the lack of identifying information complicate the assessment and referral process, making a referral difficult and awkward, especially when the host is unaware of the member's geographic location and specific needs. In the case of suicide ideation, for instance, crisis referral in cyberspace may necessitate that the host instruct the member to disconnect from the on-line support group and dial 9-1-1.

In on-line support groups for loss, members tend to build a sense of community through the sharing of grief and the support extended to each other. They tend to be sensitive and supportive in crises by expressing concern for and anxiety about each other when a member uncharacteristically alters established behavior patterns on-line and may have been hospitalized or have expired. The host must remain alert to such crises and to other transitional issues as they relate to terminal illness, suicidal thoughts (which can reflect a desire to join a deceased loved one), or death.

Hoaxes

People with unscrupulous motives can deceive an on-line support group. Loss on-line support groups, in particular, do not attract many hoaxes. The reverent respect for loss may be one explanation; another may be the heightened awareness of the violator's own mortality. Hoaxes tend to occur because members are anonymous and lack an emotional commitment to the cybercommunity. Hoaxes are most commonly perpetrated by new members, and they are most obvious when a member expresses horrific or multiple losses or unbelievable experiences (however, on occasion, such experiences or losses are truthful). In a hoax, details are usually scarce and inconsistencies emerge. An experienced host may suspect a ruse but be unable to decipher the truth. The host should continue to support the member while listening for inconsistencies

before confronting and referring the violator to the ISP Terms of Service agreement. ISPs typically lack strong consequences to punish the violator, other than placing limits upon the violator's ISP services in order to enforce appropriate behavior.

Limited Feedback

Spinney (1995) observed that on-line support groups enable members to "hide" emotionally and interpersonally behind computer screens. The absence of face-to-face contact obscures vocal intonations and verbal and nonverbal cues, including body language and expressions of emotion. Although a member may initially feel uncomfortable with limited emotional and visual feedback, such discomforts may, in time, be overcome. Those with cultural or familial barriers that inhibit open discussions about death or emotional expressions of grief, or those with interpersonal difficulties, may perceive decreased intimacy, reduced intensity, and less personal feedback as an incentive to participate in an on-line support group. They may not feel pressured to take personal and interpersonal risks as they might in face-to-face support groups (Weinberg, Schmale, et al., 1995). Moreover,

> seeing your problems expressed as words typed on a computer screen can be therapeutic in itself. . . . There is no small talk. Somebody will come straight in and say "I'm feeling like crap, I want to die, tell me why I shouldn't." (Spinney, 1995, p. 38)

The lack of interpersonal pressure may increase self-confidence and self-disclosure, thereby helping members to help themselves and each other.

Ethical and Legal Concerns

The hosting of and participation in on-line support groups raise some ethical and legal questions that currently remain unanswered. Jurisdiction is unclear and confusing because on-line support groups function without regard to geographic borders or local or national laws, making traditional mechanisms of resolution unsatisfactory for legal liability, dispute resolution, discipline, and other human services issues (Drucker, 1990; Lee, 1998; Spinney, 1995). Some questions to consider include the following:

- Should volunteer hosts, who may or may not be human services specialists, be required to comply with mental health mandatory reporting statutes (e.g., suspected or acknowledged child abuse) or with duty-to-warn statutes?
- How should these mental health statutes be enforced in cyberspace when there are no geographic boundaries or cyberspace governing agencies?
- Could an on-line support group member seek redress from an incompetent host if the host is anonymous to members?

Future revisions of mental health laws and ethical standards should include cyberspace mental health services and on-line support groups. Revisions will require the inclusion of all human services disciplines and national and international perspectives regarding standards, role, training, monitoring, and supervision of human services and nonprofessional hosts. Special attention should be given to enforcement issues in cyberspace (Bloom, 1997; Lee, 1998).

CONCLUSION

Death and the grieving process affect people directly and indirectly, in a myriad of ways, as the result of events ranging from the death of a relative or friend to a tragedy such as a school shooting. On-line support groups provide an alternative to traditional support groups by linking grieving people who seek support, especially if support is not available in their local community. Furthermore, on-line support groups can reduce the sense of isolation caused by geographical or physical/medical constraints and increase feelings of validation. Although preliminary research on the efficacy of on-line support groups suggests positive effects, on-line support groups are not appropriate for everyone and should not be considered a panacea. Some members may need additional medical and/or human services assistance as they progress through the grieving process.

This chapter has examined the function of one on-line support group for loss as well as discussed the benefits and limitations. On-line support groups and mental health web sites are viable and appropriate referral sources for those experiencing grief and other types of emotional distress. When the effective use of on-line sup-

port groups is understood and incorporated within the human services profession, human services specialists, talk show hosts, media health correspondents, and morticians will be able to recommend on-line support groups as easily as they promote counseling, traditional support groups, self-help books, CDs, and cassettes.

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